

THE PIONEER HEALTH CENTRE - 'The Centre'

The Pioneer Health Centre opened in St Mary's Road, Peckham, in 1935 and was conceived by Dr George Scott Williamson and his wife Dr Innes Pearse. It was a place where a community of families took part in a range of activities advantageous to their health across social, mental and physical environments as part of an experiment to research and advance health. As Dr Williamson put it:

"Health, we have discovered, is like a seed: it must be sown, grown, and cultivated in the seed-bed, garden, or tilled field -the homestead- of the social soil"

(Peckham: The first health Centre, by G Scott Williamson, reprinted from *The Lancet*, 16th March 1946)

Around the 1920s, Dr Williamson was interested in the notion of what health was. He questioned whether curing a disorder was the same thing as giving an individual health and on this question, there was very little research. So too Dr Pearse's work with children, led to the realisation that despite her extensive knowledge about them, she did not know what a healthy child looked or behaved like.

What happens to an individual and communities when they have health and how would that impact on society and future generations?

These were the questions that led Dr Williamson and Dr Innes Pearse to begin their first study into the nature of health by setting up a family health club in a small house on Queen's Road, Peckham in 1926 – the first Pioneer Health Centre. Local families could use the 'club' and as part of their membership were offered a health "overhaul" which allowed the doctors to study their health.

It was clear, however, that in order to continue their health, families needed more opportunities to grow, socialise and take part in activities. After 6 years of fundraising and planning, the new Pioneer Health Centre opened in May 1935. This is the Peckham Experiment.

The Centre flourished between 1935 and 1939 and between 1946 until it closed in 1950. During April 1938, it is recorded that membership of the Centre was 600 families with an average daily use of around 770 people and at its peak there were 850 families registered.

The Pioneer Health Centre was unique for its time in that it was exclusively interested in the nature of positive health and its research findings still have relevance to today where it can be seen as an important model for healthy living. The experiment showed that the nature of a person's health is satisfied if the essential needs of a person or their community are met. Children and adults can develop more healthily, happily, physically and mentally within the right physical and social environment.

It was the environment of The Pioneer Health Centre, under the management and observation of Dr Williamson and Dr Pearse who both understood the importance of having basic human needs and capabilities met, that enabled its members to live happy lives even when faced with difficulties. This healthy environment influenced all the members of the centre and even helped relationships outside of it.

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